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Bush Takes Fight Over Democrats' Prescription Proposal to Minnesota

By ADAM NAGOURNEY

MINNEAPOLIS, July 11 — With the Senate poised to debate legislation to provide prescription drug benefits — an issue sure to be prominent in the fall elections — President Bush came here today to argue against Democratic drug benefit proposals. Mr. Bush said the Democrats would give too much control to the government and discourage pharmaceutical companies from developing new drugs.

He appeared this evening at a \$1 million fund-raiser primarily for Norm Coleman, a Republican candidate for the Senate, who is trying to unseat Paul Wellstone in a race in which the battle over a prescription drug bill is likely to be central.

Mr. Bush had urged Mr. Coleman, a former mayor of St. Paul and once a Democrat, to challenge Mr. Wellstone, and the contest is shaping up as one of the closest Senate races in the nation.

Republicans say they believe Mr. Coleman's success here in November is crucial to any prospect of retaking control of the Senate next year.

Mr. Bush's remarks on Medicare drug benefits in a speech this afternoon and at the fund-raiser tonight, and the intense maneuvering on Capitol Hill on the same subject throughout the day in preparation for debates next week, reflect the calculation by both parties that the issue will be central to major Congressional races this fall.

Republicans and Democrats have offered markedly different proposals in their efforts to gain the advantage on the issue before the fall campaign.

Mr. Bush praised House Republicans for passing its version of the legislation, which would provide drug benefits to millions of elderly Americans through the private sector, rather than the government, and he urged the Senate to adopt similar legislation.

Under the Republican legislation, the government would pay subsidies to insurance companies that offered discounted prescription drug coverage to elderly Americans.

But Democrats in the Senate favor legislation that would provide higher direct

benefits through Medicare. The program would be costlier to the government than the Republican plan and would include rules and cost controls that Mr. Bush argued today would discourage pharmaceutical companies from investing in research on new drugs.

"If you want a health care system where the patient doesn't suffer but, in fact, benefits, we must be innovative and encourage a healthy private sector," Mr. Bush said. "When government determines which drugs are covered by health insurance, when government makes those decisions, the invariable results are this: there will be delays and inflexible limits on coverage of new treatments." The fund-raiser tonight was for both Mr. Coleman and John Kline, who is trying for the third time to unseat Representative Bill Luther, a Democrat. Republicans say they have good chances of defeating both incumbents.

But Mr. Bush is particularly invested in Mr. Coleman's election, given the decision to call him and urge him to run against Mr. Wellstone, rather than run for governor to succeed Jesse Ventura, as Mr. Coleman had planned.

Of the \$1 million raised tonight, about \$300,000 would go to Mr. Coleman's campaign, White House officials said.

In citing Mr. Coleman's strengths, Mr. Bush noted that Mr. Coleman had been a Democratic mayor of St. Paul before switching to the Republican Party in 1996.

"He wins as a Republican because he brought a compassionate conservative agenda to the people," Mr. Bush said. "He focused on things that matter, like jobs and making sure that children got a quality education."